

CASPER Star Tribune

LGBTQ student at UW targeted by message displayed in student union



Sorority students, left, stand in an attempt to block passerbyers from reading the displayed statement from Todd Schmidt concerning a University of Wyoming student. Schmidt, right, can be seen taking down the University of Wyoming students name after request from Dean of Student Affairs Ryan O'Neil, far right. (Disclaimer: Individual requested that their name be blurred in published works.)

Preston Harrison, Branding Iron

Joshua Wolfson , Maya Shimizu Harris

EXHIBIT P

A Laramie church elder targeted a student who's part of the University of Wyoming's LGBTQ community in a message that was displayed Friday in the Wyoming Union breezeway.

The encounter was one of multiple "harmful incidents" reported at LGBTQ-specific events last week at the school, university groups said.

In the Friday incident, Laramie Faith Community Church elder Todd Schmidt set up a table at the breezeway with a sign stating "God Created Male and Female and [the student's name] is a male," multiple people told the Star-Tribune on Monday. A **photo published by the Branding Iron newspaper showed** the table and a group of students standing nearby.



A sign hangs from Todd Schmidt's Union table that claims that a University of Wyoming student is a male. (Disclaimer: Individual requested that their name be blurred in published works.)

Preston Harrison, Branding Iron

A university official told Schmidt to remove the student's name, and he complied, university spokesman Chad Baldwin told the Star-Tribune. The university did not identify Schmidt, but he confirmed the incident in a short interview with the Star-Tribune.

"He was told that if he didn't take a name off, he would be removed from the building," Baldwin said. "He complied fairly quickly, I think, after that message was delivered."

Because Schmidt complied, he was allowed to stay, Baldwin said.

"And while the individual engaged in heated exchanges with students and perhaps others throughout the afternoon, these interactions were not in obvious violation of UW policies," UW President Ed Seidel wrote in a message sent to all students and staff on Monday morning.



'It doesn't feel safe'

Some UW students expressed frustration with the university's decision to allow Schmidt — whom they said has been targeting LGBTQ students for years — to stay. UW student Riley Skorcz, previously an officer with the university's Queer Community Coalition, said it's a "pretty well established thing within the queer community on campus" that the man "harasses queer students" and "is very inflammatory in his remarks."

"It's definitely uncomfortable," UW student Hanna Crockett, who currently co-chairs the Queer Community Coalition, said. "It doesn't feel safe or secure when he's there."

Following Friday's incident, Crockett said that a vigil scheduled on the same day for the Club Q shooting was rescheduled for Monday and moved off campus.

"We felt that for considerations of safety it would be best to move the event off campus and to change the time," Crockett said. "We also have additional security measures taken just in case."

Schmidt told the Star-Tribune he's been preaching at the university for 17 years, but Friday's sign was the first time that he singled out a student on one of his messages. He said he chose to do so because the student is already well known.

People at the student union confronted him within about 15 minutes, he said.

"It created quite a firestorm," he said. "I was just confronted with a lot of vitriol."

Schmidt said he first declined to take the sign down, but changed course after a university official told him it was in conflict with the university's mission. He called it a violation of his free speech rights and maintained that he doesn't hate anyone, but is trying to preach the Gospel.

Schmidt plans to return to the student union on Friday, but said he hasn't decided what to include on his sign this time around.

"I'm going back there for sure," he said. "I'm sure I'm going to be confronted by a lot of people."

Separate incidents

Seidel's message also said there were two other unrelated incidents on Wednesday and Thursday evenings involving what members of the school's LGBTQ community observed as "disruptive behavior" at separate campus events.

On Wednesday, people meeting in the Multicultural Resources Center room in the Wyoming Union heard a group of students making negative comments about the flags located in the space. Then on Thursday evening, the same students were overheard mocking an exhibit at a UW Art Museum Pokes Pride event celebrating the end of the "Queer on the Frontier" exhibition, Baldwin said in a subsequent email.

Skorcz said some conservative students seem to "feel emboldened" to act on their disapproval of queer people right now.

"On the other hand, I'm interacting with conservative students who feel that they are allies and that they support queer students, but also at the same time feel that they cannot express their conservative beliefs without being labeled bigoted or homophobic," she said.

University response

A statement shared Friday evening by UW's Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and by university Multicultural Affairs said "various harmful incidents that affect our community have occurred at queer-specific campus events throughout this week..."

"The harm that was caused this week has left a lot of pain for many, if not all of us, in the community," the message reads. "For those of us who have been hurt and negatively impacted by the biased incidents this week, we are sorry. We share your feelings of frustration, mistrust, fear, anger and hurt."

The university is now investigating all three incidents, Seidel said in his message, and the school would “take appropriate actions” if any further violations are determined to take place.

“In the meantime, we remind everyone that our UW community values are fundamental and straightforward: community, integrity, respect, responsibility and social consciousness,” Seidel wrote. “The university continues to support creating a climate where all members feel they are welcomed and belong. Such a climate means there are a wide variety of perspectives among our community AND that we engage regarding those different perspectives with respect and integrity. As a reflection, an approach of respect and integrity is about calling people into conversation as opposed to calling people out.”

Seidel said anyone affected negatively by the incidents could contact the Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion. The Rainbow Resource Center was also available for support.

The university’s Collegiate Panhellenic Council, which represents two local sororities, also posted a statement on the incident, saying it was disheartened toward the situation and offered unrelentingly support toward UW’s queer community.

“We stand with the individual, the LGBTQIA+ community, and any and all individuals affected by this event,” the statement reads in part. “We see you, we hear you, and we will continue to stand with you.”

Some see the university’s statement on the incidents as inadequate.

“ASUW is frustrated to hear of these incidents happening against our LGBTQIA2S+ community without adequate response from the university and is committed to moving forward to response to these incidents and working to create a more welcoming climate on campus for all students,” a Monday statement from the Associated Students of the University of Wyoming said. (Skorcz is ASUW’s chief of staff.)

Though she thinks there's room for more to be done, Skorcz also said she was hopeful that the level of visibility of these events might push the university to change how it handles such incidents in the future.

"I try to maintain some level of hope and optimism, particularly because in my experiences with this university, that level of public accountability is sometimes the thing that forces them into action," Skorcz said, noting that the university's statement on the incident was "the most direct statement that they have released" during her time at the university regarding queer issues on campus.

UW student and ASUW Director of Diversity and Inclusion Iván Sapien also expressed some optimism that these incidents could be the harbingers of bigger change.

"I don't think that the situations that are happening are beneficial, but I think having everyone talk about this more is a better thing," he said.

"I do think that is a positive impact and it will continue to have a domino effect across campus itself."

Increasing scrutiny

There's been increased scrutiny and discussion around LGBTQ issues in Wyoming and across the nation in recent years.

This election cycle, school board races have been mired in controversy over books some community members deemed inappropriate for students. Several of those books, which some have called "pornographic," deal specifically with transgender identities. A number of people who vied for school board seats this year — some of them members of local Moms for Liberty groups — ran in part on platforms to oust those books from school libraries.

Outgoing State Superintendent of Public Instruction Brian Schroeder held an event in October to raise his concerns about the "sexualization" of minors in schools. Several speakers at the event focused on their fears around transgender identity and issues.

There will also be more bills for lawmakers to consider during the upcoming Legislative session that concern transgender individuals.

Sen. Charles Scott, R-Casper, told the Star-Tribune that he plans to sponsor a bill that would penalize doctors who provide certain gender-affirming medical care to minors. (Scott said he's still working on the bill's draft.) Sen. Wendy Schuler, R-Evanston, also said she plans to bring back the Fairness in Women's Sports Act, which would bar transgender women and girls from playing on female school sports teams. Schuler told the Star-Tribune that she plans to make some tweaks to the bill.

On Monday, Gov. Mark Gordon posted a message on his official Facebook page addressing attacks on LGBTQ people, as well as rising anti-semitism.

“Targeted attacks on LGBTQ people and the increasing visibility of anti-semitism in our country is both deeply concerning and (un-American),” Gordon wrote. “As the Equality State, Wyoming is not – and should not be – a place where bigotry, discrimination and anti-semitism are tolerated. The Wyoming Constitution speaks clearly and emphatically about civil rights and equality for ‘all members of the human race.’ Tolerance and understanding are essential to the health of our state and our nation.”

Gordon's statement didn't reference the recent incidents at UW.
